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Tempo  
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Health  
Technology  
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Sunday, May 1, 2005

## Wine grapes newest cash crop

### N.Ky. touted as good growing region for vines

By Mike Rutledge  
Enquirer staff writer

**ATWOOD** - Nelson and Julie Clinkenbeard, hoping to someday pass their 115-acre farm to a sixth generation of their family, switched this year from tobacco to grapes to keep it going.

"We thought that was done in California or some European country, but they say we're in the right area," Nelson Clinkenbeard said as he stood on a sloping former pasture Wednesday that had never had much of a use until grapes. "They say years ago this used to be the grape country of the Midwest."

At least 12,000 vines will be planted this spring on about 24 acres in a 10-county area of Northern Kentucky - about doubling the region's acreage devoted to grapes - said Larry Leap of the Northern Kentucky Vintners & Grape Growers Association. He expects even more vines will be planted next year.

This spring's planting will put grapes ahead of any other fruit in Campbell, Kenton and Boone counties, said David Koester, a Campbell County agriculture extension agent for horticulture. "This resurgence in grapes, I'd say at the end of this planting season, there will be a good bit more acreage in grapes than in any other fruit crop in Northern Kentucky," Koester said.

"If anything, it just shows how little acreage is devoted to some of these other things," Koester said, noting



Dennis Walter of Camp Springs, who has been growing wine grapes for five years, shows off his vineyard to visitors who are interested in planting the crop, in many cases as a follow-on to tobacco.

Photos by Patrick Reddy/The Enquirer  
[Zoom](#)

#### WINE EVENTS

Here are other wine-related happenings in the Northern Kentucky area:

Northern Kentucky Wine Festival, Oct. 15, noon to 8 p.m. at St. Joseph Church in Camp Springs.

The Behringer-Crawford Museum in Covington's Devou Park on Friday night launched its "History of Wine in the Rhine Valley of America" exhibit, which will run through July 17. The exhibit focuses on the early wine industry along the Ohio River in Kentucky, Indiana and Ohio. Displays include a wine press and cultivating tools, and an altar cloth and wine bottles from Covington's Monte Cassino, operated by the Benedictine Monks. The exhibit is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through

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orchards have been closing locally. "I'm not talking about hundreds of acres of grapes. A few acres of grapes, though, is a tremendous thing to take care of, and a tremendous investment."

Koester estimates the three northernmost counties may have about 20 acres of vines by summer: "And that's a tremendous jump from five years ago."

Vines have arrived the past two weeks, but recent rainy weather has slowed planting of the delicate plants with long roots. It will be three years before those vines produce grapes for wine.

## No tobacco here

The Clinkenbeards will be planting 500 vines - vidal blanc and Cayuga white - on about an acre. Their vines cost \$1.90 each.

"There's probably never been a crop of tobacco missed here since 1920, and I guess this is going to be the first year there won't be tobacco here," said Nelson Clinkenbeard, who recently accepted a tobacco buyout for a few thousand dollars per year over 10 years. "We were sitting around and we thought: Is there going to be life after tobacco? Then we went to one of those grape meetings."

So did others of diverse backgrounds, including people who own land but have never farmed before.

At the meetings, they learned that in the 19th and early 20th centuries, grapes grew along valleys on both sides of the Ohio River, in what once was called "the Rhine Valley of America."

Diseases devastated the industry, and Prohibition killed it here. But Northern Kentucky grapes and wines are on the upswing, and have begun appearing in some area restaurants, like Bonefish Grill, and wine stores.

## A prudent investment

The transition is big for Clinkenbeard, 50, who works as a switchman at Newport Steel. He bought 10 acres shortly after he graduated from Simon Kenton High School so he could farm tobacco.

In 1920, his grandfather, Russell "Rodie" Clinkenbeard, bought the farm about three miles south of Nicholson, and he worked the farm with his

Friday; 1-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; and is closed Mondays. Admission is \$3 for adults; and \$2 for students and senior citizens.

The Campbell County High School Future Farmers of America soon will have a vineyard next to the new horticultural greenhouse.

The soil will be tested early this week, and vines will be planted shortly after that. Being considered are vines for chardonnay, cabernet franc and vidal blanc.



**Julie Clinkenbeard of Morningview takes measurements in Dennis Walter's Camp Springs vineyard.**  
[Zoom](#)



parents. He died at age 99.

Five generations behind Rodie's parents, the Clinkenbeards' 1-year-old granddaughter, Paige Clinkenbeard, may work it someday, too, the family hopes.

Without tobacco, the farm was left only with its black angus cow and calf operation. And with mad cow disease jeopardizing the beef industry, the Clinkenbeards decided to diversify.

"Well, here we're sitting on this place. We're paying taxes and insurance," Nelson Clinkenbeard said. "And this just might help turn it over to the next generation. This just might be what it takes to keep the place in the family."

For Bill Wehrman of Grants Lick, a 76-year-old father of six, family time is a big motivation for planting vines on a third of an acre at his 255-acre farm.

In a good year, an acre of vineyard can produce five to six tons of grapes.

"I have two (40-something-year-old) boys who are really interested in it," Wehrman said. "So they're the ones who are probably going to do most of the work."

"They'll give up their weekends and some of their holidays to come out here and do that," along with his grandchildren, he said. "It's a lot of fun to have my kids around me when we're doing this. That's basically the reason I do it."

Wehrman, who raised cattle and also has grown soybeans and lumber, once grew concord grapes. But he believes those were less delicate.

"Those things, you almost have to hit 'em with a hammer to kill them out," he said. "But these, as I understand, are a little more tender."

"My son once gave me a drink of Dom Perignon, and I told him he was wasting his time, 'cause I wouldn't know if it was good or bad," Wehrman said. "That's how I am with wine."

In Walton, nursing student and newspaper-delivery person Deidra Kelley, 37, is planting 500 chambourcin vines on the six-acre farm she bought in January 2004.

"We just wanted to get out of the city," said Kelley, who moved from Delhi Township. "We wanted some land. It's attractive out here. We have a small lake.

"I wanted to be able to use the land," Kelley said. "I hated to see it go to waste."

She briefly considered raising goats, but decided she couldn't sell them for slaughter.

She and 42-year-old fiancé Don Bryant, who also delivers newspapers, will do the work together on the high-maintenance plants.

"I think there's a lot of physical labor, and people underestimate the time

that's going to go into it," Kelley said. "Right now I'm just sort of building up reserves to be able to take care of that."

She has been impressed with the Kentucky wines she has tasted.

"The wines I've tried are really, really good. And I would like to be a part of that," Kelley said. "But I have no ambitions to ever open a winery. I just would like to be in the grape part of it, and produce some good grapes for good wines."

## Hope for the future

Koester, the Campbell County extension agent, has hope for the infant industry. So does the state of Kentucky, which has hired winemaking and vine experts.

"If we could get a name for ourselves, and begin to promote our area as a wine region, and have maybe a wine trail where people can visit the various vineyards and sample their wine, I think it's got great potential," he said. "I think the population base we have around here, it's a great opportunity."

More than a dozen newer grape growers gathered Friday afternoon at the Camp Springs farm of Dennis Walter to learn from Walter and Koester about planting and tending vines.

Walter recently planted 1¼ acres of cabernet franc and a quarter acre of vines for concord grapes.

Walter now has more than 4½ acres of grapes on his hilly land. He sells them to River Valley Winery in Carrollton and to Leap's Lost Heritage Vineyards label in Alexandria.

"We've got a tasting room close to opening," he said.

It's just down the road from his farm, in a remodeled farmhouse that will be known as Stonebrook Winery, at 6570 Vineyard Lane. "We're hoping to be open in June."

"That will allow us to sell Kentucky wines. We want to consign wines from different Kentucky wineries," he said. "We're going to have Kentucky crafts in there."

Wehrman has a lighthearted attitude about the enterprise.

"We may be out of this business next year. Who knows?" he said. "It's just an adventure we would like to take on, and perhaps it will spring. Perhaps it won't."

Nelson Clinkenbeard also smiles at the prospects.

"If we can't sell them, I guess we'll make wine out of them," he said, although he has leaned toward beer. "I'm looking forward to that part, sitting around here drinking wine, eating cheese."

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